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ABSTRACT

This is a transcript of a weekly radio "magazine" program devoted to coverage of the field of education. The theme is the American teacher. Discussion includes: (1) students' opinions of what makes a good teacher; (2) John Holt, critic of American education; (3) student tricks and pranks; (4) a favorite teacher; (5) listener letters. (MM)

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INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
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PORTRAIT OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER

PART III

PROGRAM #64 FEBRUARY 7, 1977

Options in Education

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is an electronic weekly magazine devoted to coverage of news, features, policy & people in the field of education. The program is available for broadcast to the 185 member stations of National Public Radio.

The Executive Producer is John Merrow. The Acting Producer is JoEllyn Rackleff, and the Co-Host is Wendy Blair.

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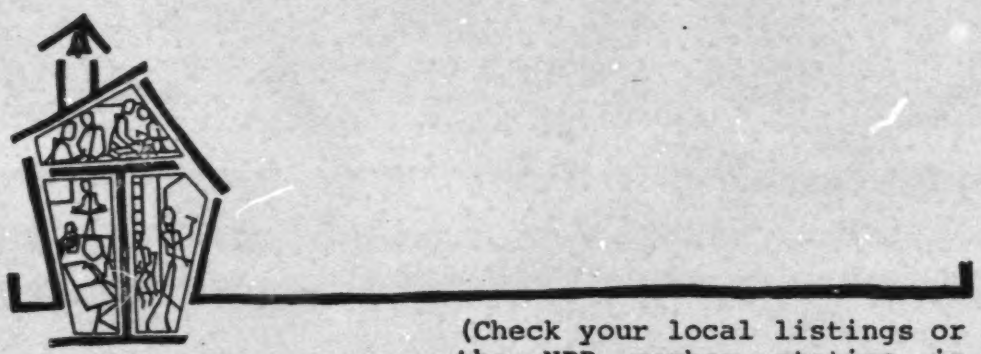

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TEACHER: "I guess I could say that I became a teacher because it was really the only avenue opened up ..."

TEACHER: "I like kids. I enjoy teaching kids. It's a true answer, really, I think ..."

TEACHER: "I think it was because -- when I was growing up, girls that went to college became teachers. And I can remember from being a very little girl, everybody always said, 'Oh, Paula's so good with children!' I don't ever remember making a conscious decision. I wouldn't do it again if I had that decision."

REPORTER: "What would you rather be doing?"

TEACHER: "I'd like to be a member of the State Legislature of South Carolina, at this point."

TEACHER: "My father was a teacher -- and I guess I followed in his footsteps."

TEACHER: "I think I teach because I enjoy being involved in a profession that is respected by society."

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair -- and you know, over 2.3 million people in this country are teachers.

MERROW: And right now, we're going to continue our look at teachers in America.

STUDENT: "Well, I think a teacher should be fair, but should give a little attention to every one of the kids, in his own way. And ... he should be strict, but to only a point. He should let ... sometimes, you can have some fun ..."

STUDENT: "I think he should get you ready for the next ... the teacher should get you ready for the next grade, and be fair."

MERROW: "Do you think it's important that the teacher get to know each kid?"

ALL: "Yeah."

STUDENT: "Because if the teacher doesn't know you, he doesn't have very much confidence in you -- like he should. That's what I think a teacher should have -- confidence."

MERROW: We've learned a lot about teachers in the last few weeks.

BLAIR: That's right, John. And we confirmed what most of us suspected -- that teachers are underpaid. The average salary is about $12,500 a year.

MERROW: Which is not all that bad -- but the fact is that we pay many plumbers and electricians far more than that. And while all jobs in society are important, the profession of teaching our children is not very well compensated.

BLAIR: A survey by the National Education Association shows 90% of

teachers are white, and the majority of American teachers tend to come from blue-collar families -- and they tend to be conservative, politically. For many, teaching is a way to reach the middle-class.

MERROW: Most elementary school teachers are female -- but in secondary school, most teachers are male. Most principals are male, as well.

BLAIR: Of course, by the time you reach college-level teaching, males outnumber females by a huge margin -- 3 to 1.

MERROW: So, that's a little bit about who are teachers are -- but what kind of a job are they doing?

BLAIR: In teaching, perhaps more than in any other profession, who you are -- what kind of person you are -- determines, in part, what kind of job you'll do. In short, most of us expect good teachers to be good people; morally upright, fair and fond of children.

MERROW: "What makes a bad teacher? You must have had some bad teachers. What makes a bad teacher? Everybody's raising their hand!"

STUDENT: "Well ... like, always being grouchy and stuff -- and yelling at you for no reason."

STUDENT: "I think that being too ... being too easy is a bad teacher, 'cause they do not -- they don't give you much. If you don't have assignments due, like the next day or the day after, you drag off, and they can't make mistakes ... they can never ... 'Mr. Know-it-All' -- and they can't have mistakes, and we have to ... all the mistakes they make, they'd take it out on you, or something."

STUDENT: "Not being honest, and not being fair with ... not being honest with the kids."

STUDENT: "Well, I don't think they should give attention to just one person -- to have a favorite."

MERROW: "The teacher you have now ... does that teacher have a favorite?"

STUDENT: "Lisa."

STUDENT: "Lisa."

STUDENT: "Lisa."

STUDENT: "Lisa."

STUDENT: "Lisa."

STUDENT: "Lisa."

"Teacher's pet ... I wanna be teacher's pet.
I wanna take home a diploma, and show ma that
you love me, too ...
So I can be teacher's pet after school is through!
Teacher, teacher ... she loves you."

("TEACHER'S PET", sung by Doris Day)

BLAIR: Well, that's what the kids think makes teachers ineffective.

MERROW: But those students I talked to aren't the only ones critical

of teachers. Everyone in society is taking pot shots at the schools these days. Public education was supposed to solve all the nation's ills -- and with declining test scores, rising teenage unemployment, and other problems -- many people are saying that teachers just aren't doing a good job.

REPORTER: "What do you think about the quality of teaching in this school?"

STUDENT: "Well ... some of it's pretty good, but then, that all depends -- like, half the time, like in my biology class, we just learn through packets. We really don't learn anything, and it's all required, and it's not gonna help us. It's just gonna ... the only thing it'll help me do is work in a McDonalds stand. I think they're passing us on like another number for another buck."

STUDENT: "You just go over the same stuff you already know."

STUDENT: "Well, I'm a Chinese -- and the bilingual program is real good, and they use Chinese teacher. If I really don't understand this in English, I could ask them in Chinese, and understand it."

STUDENT: "Well, I think teachers should start off strict with you, because, you know -- if they start out all soft with them in the first place, and the class get out of hand, and then, if they try to start -- you know -- change their rules, and the class don't pay no attention to them."

STUDENT: "They need to do somethin'!"

REPORTER: "Like what?"

STUDENT: "A lot of 'somethin' -- a lot of somethin' ..."

STUDENT: "The teachers are ... are on their jobs, too ..."

MAN: "Only thing I'm doin' up here, sir, is I'm doin' ... I'm pimpin', you know? That's all!"

STUDENT: "The teachers ... I can't say the teachers are on their jobs. The students is the ones that's really not ..."

STUDENT: "Really ... you know ... obnoxious, you know."

STUDENT: "Out of hand ... out of hand."

STUDENT: "Some teachers teach all right ... but don't have to change. It should ask the class what their opinions are -- what they would like to learn ..."

BLAIR: Jay Baltezore talking with some high school students in San Francisco. To even the score, later in the program, we'll read letters from some of our listeners about their favorite teachers.

MERROW: Most of the students we heard from said they wanted teachers to give them more individual attention -- and to challenge them without intimidating them.

BLAIR: And that's a tall order for one teacher in a room with thirty or forty students. Jennifer Alt talked about the problems and fads in teacher techniques with Dr. Zachary Clements, a self-described educator and humanist.

DR. ZACHARY CLEMENTS

CLEMENTS: I've gone into schools today ... I'm frequently met at the front door, and that especially happens at the secondary level -- and I'm met at the front door by a principal who says to me, "Zach, you're really gonna like our school because we're really individualizing!" So I say to myself, "Well, let me go see this miracle!" So I get to the school, and get into the classroom, rather, and almost inevitably -- what I find is ... each kid has 4,876 dittos in front of him, see ... and it's in a program.

And the way it works is -- each child works at his own pace. Nobody's pushed, you know ... if you want to take it easy one day, and work hard the next day, that's okay. And the teacher becomes sort of a "walker-arounder, looker-over-the shoulderer" -- and he says, "How are you doing today, Seymour?" "Oh, neat!" "Uh ... well, how many more pages you got? Well! Let's see ... you're on 442. Well, you've only got a thousand to go. Keep it up! It's only June ... what the heck!"

The problem with that type of "individualized instruction" is that you have kids walk up to you to say things like this: "Hey Mr. -- um ... you know, I'm in this new program, and we do these things, you know -- these sheets, and everything, but -- you know? Uh .. do you think that you could tell the teacher that sometime maybe we could raise our hands, you know, and he can write on the board, you know, and then talk to us, and we could do stuff ..." "Yeah, I know. We call that 'teach.'"

Now, obviously, I've given you an example of the bad side of the coin. Now, on the other hand, there are some very excellent techniques being evolved to try to, more effectively meet needs of individuals, and not "teach to the masses" -- to the middle, if you will. Some places where they're doing effective team teaching. Now, quite frankly, I'm not optimistic about team teaching. Team teaching, a few years ago, was seen as the great hope of American education -- you know, you get 3 teachers together; each one has different talents -- 90 kids, manipulate groups -- large, small. And that turned into one teaches, one smokes and the other monitors. And, you know, we call that the "one-for-the-price-of-three method" -- and that kind of ... I've lost hope in that particular technique, and so I don't advocate it. But yet, in some schools, I've seen very effective teams.

ALT: Okay. As a former teacher, you hit upon one of my largest frustrations in teaching, and that was, "Help ... what do I do? I have this end of the spectrum; I have this end of the spectrum. How can I possibly, in my one room ..."

CLEMENTS: Okay. Now, if I could answer that, you'd have to take out your rosary beads, because I'd be ascending at any moment! Obviously, this ... you must understand that our country has not placed a tremendous premium on education. I know the taxpayers who may be tuned into this may turn off at this point. But the fact of the matter is we aren't. When we put 30 in a room with one teacher in the logistic situation you described to me, we're saying -- what I hear us saying is, "Well, we really don't care. And that we're gonna lose some of the troops, but that's the way it goes. We want this hill at all costs, and if we lose a few casualties along the way, that's life!"

The fact of the matter is -- what we have to try to do is the best we can, given the circumstances we're in. And they'd begin to understand why we want smaller classes. You know, that's one of my pet peeves. Clever school board members, or these people at the state level -- State Board of Education levels -- will say to me, "Well, what studies have ever been done to prove the size of classes that's optimum?" And I always say to them, "You think you got me with that one.

Well, I can't cite a study, but I do know this -- the larger the class, the less the personal attention each child gets -- period." And if you've ever been in a classroom, you'd know that to be fact.

BLAIR: Educator Dr. Zachary Clements talking with Jennifer Alt of Station KHKE, KUNI, in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

MERROW: One of the most persistent critics of American education is John Holt. He talked with Kay Wilson in Missoula, Montana.

JOHN HOLT

HOLT: People say to me, "What do you think good teacher training would be?" I say, "Pretty much ... none." Let them start teaching, and then give them time to talk about their problems and difficulties with other people who are having the same problems and difficulties, or with people who've got a little more experience -- but most of what is done in every school of education I've ever heard of is, at best, useless -- and much more likely -- harmful. It's a great blessing to me that I never had any of it.

But I began teaching, you know, as a living, at age 30, and I had never taken any courses -- and the important result of that was because I went into the classroom knowing that I didn't know much, and therefore, I kept my eyes and ears open, and I looked and I listened, and I thought about what I was seeing. The trouble with kids who come out of schools of education is that they think they already know -- and they don't. And because they think they know, they're not ... on the whole, they're incapable of learning.

Every conceivable situation has been already diagnosed. They have their little box, and they come into the classroom, and they look for situations that they can put their labels on. "Ah! He's an over-achiever! Ah! She's an under-achiever! Ah! He's culturally deprived! Ah! He's improperly motivated!" You know ... so instead of learning from what is happening underneath their eyes, they just pop into these little ready-made categories, and then they -- you know, they got their little recipe book ... "Well, in this case, you do that, and in this case -- you do that."

WILSON: Do you think that the changes that you would like to see happen really are going to come about?

HOLT: I think there are some reasons for believing that the general public in the next generation or so, is gonna get very fed up with schooling. I don't much care, you know. I mean, if I had a crystal ball, I wouldn't pay ... I wouldn't spend much time looking at it. The point is, the world is gonna change -- and it's either gonna change in ways that I like, or ways that I don't like, so you get in there, and you do what you can.

MERROW: School critic John Holt talking with Kay Wilson of Station KUFM in Missoula, Montana.

TEACHER: "I have to say I think about my teacher education -- it's just sort of like you're pushed into the ocean."

TEACHER: "I guess I was more fortunate than most. I entered teaching later. I was in the 'real world', if you will, for several years -- went to school nights -- and I never turned aside any veteran teacher who had some bit of advice to give me. Unfortunately, many young teachers today don't look to the elder statesmen of the profession for help. I did."

REPORTER: "What about teacher education? Did the stuff you learned in school help you in the classroom, or not?"

TEACHER: "Yeah. There's a lot of factual information that's necessary -- about skills and philosophies, and that kind of thing. But I think one thing that they don't do enough of is teach about group behavior, and ... they teach a lot about how individuals behave and how to work with an individual, and that's fine, except that when you go into a classroom, you're working with 3-35 children, and how a child behaves on his own is one thing. How they interreact with their peer group is another -- and that's something I didn't know much about."

TEACHER: "In later years, I thought I was really a very good teacher -- and I thought that I was able to help the teachers who worked under me."

HOLT: "I think the quality -- the teaching is adequate. I have some serious questions about what we're putting out."

MERROW: John Holt is critical of American teacher training -- how teachers learn to teach. But another critic, Dr. Al Raby, Professor of Education at the University of Chicago, is concerned not so much how teachers teach reading, writing and arithmetic. He's concerned about the expectations teachers raise in students about what life will be like for them.

RABY: "I had a kid come in one day, who had been shot at. And I turned, and he said, 'As I was coming across the street, some kids shot at me.' I turned and I said, 'I don't believe you' -- and all the kids said, 'No, it's true, Mr. Raby!' He left, and came back -- on his way back to school, he was picked up with a gun. Now, anybody familiar with the west side of the city of Chicago knows that a teacher there is impotent."

MERROW: Dr. Raby talked with Scott Simon in Chicago.

DR. AL RABY

RABY: One of the purposes of education is to prepare people to live in the world. Then, children on the west side of the city of Chicago need to understand economics as they impinge upon their lives; that is, that they need to understand that it is not their fault that there're rats in the building -- that it's not their fault that there's not enough heat -- that there's nothing that, individually, they can do to correct that.

SIMON: Tell me, how do teachers support some of the myths of American society?

RABY: Well, I think that they accept them uncritically. What the child does is to learn the reality himself, and he does not see education as relevant to solving any, or dealing with, or understanding any of his problems. So that there is no connection for him. I guess I believe that education ought to be an experience in reality -- it ought not to be a lie. I think at this point in our society, for example, it's ridiculous to talk to a black student about him someday becoming President. That may in his lifetime occur -- and in fact, it may occur to some black child. To the extent to which it's inspirational and motivational, then it's valuable -- but to the extent to which it places the responsibility and the blame for success on him, where in fact, much of that blame, or responsibility, is a societal factor, over which he has no control.

SIMON: Uh huh.

RABY: Then I think that it's disillusioning -- the myth that all children

are born equal. For example, the teacher's strike in southern Illinois -- in Cesser, Illinois -- which was a town of coal miners, and it seemed to me, absolutely ridiculous that in that town that had the long tradition of union activity -- those citizens -- those union members -- could not understand or identify themselves with, or associate themselves with what the teachers were doing. And I contended then, and content now, that a great deal of that is because the education they got, propagated by the teachers themselves, was one in which, for example, there is no history of the labor movement, so that the struggle -- the connection of the struggle of teachers, as it relates historically and currently and futuristically to other working-class people -- was just not there, and I place a significant amount of the responsibility in terms of the consciousness of that on teachers.

SIMON: I wonder about something though, because if you move the definition of the -- or the self-definition of teachers -- to, you know, something that more closely, empathetically alligns itself with the labor movement -- you're gonna have people taking a look at the results of their work by a more easily measurable standard, as, you know, they would that a coal worker has to hack x amount of poundage in a given day. If you were to take a look at teachers in nearly any major city; the one we're sitting in right now -- Chicago -- the standards would say to some people that they aren't doing their job well, and maybe don't deserve increases in wages -- don't deserve the hours that they have.

RABY: Well, my concern ... one, I think that the question of what resources one gets is a function of power, so that -- that on the one hand ... whether Rockefeller deserves what he has or not, he continues to accumulate it. And that is a function of power. On the other hand, I argue that all public employees -- not simply teachers -- their bosses are ultimately the public, and the public has to be convinced that the kind of services that they're delivering are worth being delivered -- because otherwise, what will happen is that the society will respond negatively.

SIMON: Are you in any way painting a scenario whereby -- I don't know -- we're placing the abandonment of success -- material, acquisitive success as the ultimate measure -- painting a scenario whereby the teachers are understanding that they have to assert their power, and they're passing this along to their students, who understand that collectively -- as citizens, as human beings, as whatever professionals or blue-collar laborers they might become, they have to assert their power of bringing about -- or someone say perpetuating an American society that consists of power groups, each applying leverage on the other, each practically bashing each other in the sensitive spots of their heads -- to gain something?

RABY: Well, I am arguing that there's no one in this society that has any power that doesn't act collectively, or use the pooling of resources, collectively, for their benefit.

SIMON: Do you think teachers are sometimes a little bit reluctant to assert themselves because that's just not ... that doesn't fit the image of the statuary that teachers are supposed to be? Because sometimes ... I don't know, it seems that ... I wonder if teachers sometimes just don't want to see themselves as a group of garbagemen striking for their rights -- they prefer to see themselves as ethereal figures -- devoted to children.

RABY: You're right. Maybe what we're experiencing is a lack of collective value, or the disillusionment of the past collective values, and that some kind of way, we've got to re-establish, then, this new technological society -- some values that have meaning for it.

SIMON: What does a teacher do?

RABY: Well, I think that the beginning is examining their own role, and

taking on the responsibility of being the critic of the system, and a communicator with the public.

MERROW: Dr. Al Raby, talking with Scott Simon of Station WBEZ in Chicago. Raby believes we have to stop thinking of teachers as saints. He also says that teachers should stop teaching slogans like "If you're willing to work hard, you'll get ahead." That's not realistic -- and students must be taught that powerful forces in society keep many people -- black, white, female and poor -- from attaining their goals.

BLAIR: And yet, reality is a relative terms. Teachers teach the reality that they know, and that depends on where one comes from.

MERROW: David Klein, a regular contributor to National Public Radio's news program, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, has some thoughts on where America's teachers are coming from. He talked with Susan Stamberg.

DAVID KLEIN

KLEIN: Now it's true -- there's no absolutely clear-cut research on the subject, but a whole lot of somewhat indirect evidence indicates pretty clearly that young teachers come from families with less education and lower occupational status than the teachers of 30 or 40 years ago -- and this research evidence is very strongly confirmed by impressions I hear from people who are teaching in schools of education.

STAMBERG: Well, if this is right, what ... how do you explain the change?

KLEIN: Well, 30 or 40 years ago, teachers tended to come from solidly middle-class families, because these were the only families that could really afford to send their daughters to college, and also -- because outside of school teaching, there were very few professional opportunities for these girls. But today, the middle-class girl sees a lot of careers open to her that promise a whole lot more challenge and more prestige.

STAMBERG: Not to mention more money, most likely. We know how badly teachers are paid.

KLEIN: Of course. Right. And so, today, teachers are coming increasingly from working-class backgrounds -- because a working-class girl sees teaching as her most accessible route into the middle-class. It requires only a Bachelor's degree, and -- as you know, until the recent crunch -- it promised a degree of security that was especially attractive to anyone brought up among the uncertainties of working-class life.

STAMBERG: Okay. What does that mean, then, for the teacher-pupil relationships? A teacher from a lower class family, for an example, might -- that teacher not be -- I hate these terms, "lower-class, middle-class, upper-class" -- you know, exactly ... maybe you ought to spend some time defining them, but for the moment, let's go on -- might it not then make him or her especially good with students from the same kind of background?

KLEIN: You'd certainly think so, Susan. But actually, it doesn't seem to work out in practice. The old-style, middle-class teacher may have condescended to a lot of her lower-class students -- and she may have been a bit chauvinistic in insisting that they learn middle-class behavior and nothing else -- but if she regarded lower-class kids as heathens, she also had a kind of missionary zeal in getting them to see the light.

STAMBERG: And ... what about these young teachers you're talking about who are coming from this sort of working-class, or lower-class background?

KLEIN: Well, if this teacher was herself brought up with a fairly authoritarian style of child-rearing, and if her own family regarded other ethnic groups with a mixture of hostility and fear -- and both authoritarianism and overt bigotry are somewhat more common in working than in middle-class, then the chances are that her classroom behavior will reflect her upbringing, regardless of what she may have learned in education courses.

This is the kind of teacher who's likely to say about her lower-class kids, "There's no use trying to teach them -- they just don't want to learn!"

STAMBERG: Yeah, but is there any evidence for that -- that the kids are not learning as well from these teachers as they did from these solid, middle-class types of yore?

KLEIN: Well, I think that the decline in S.A.T. verbal scores does provide some evidence, although, of course, other factors are involved. The fact is, however, that kids simply are not taught to speak, or to write or to spell as adequately as they used to -- and that students come to college, many of them unable to write a coherent term paper.

STAMBERG: Yeah.

KLEIN: Now, this has been blamed on the fact that we're now getting into the colleges kids, who thirty years ago, wouldn't have finished their education at the high school level.

STAMBERG: Yes.

KLEIN: But the fact is, Susan, that when I was in elementary school, I had lots of classmates who came from minority ethnic groups, and from families where educated English wasn't spoken -- but the teacher somehow managed to teach them all to write and speak decently.

STAMBERG: And today ... what?

KLEIN: Today, the teacher herself is less likely to come from a family that prizes and enjoys the graceful use of language. All you have to do is listen to teachers speak or read, or read what they write in the journals of education to recognize this -- and as a consequence, kids who come from literate homes wind up reading, writing and speaking adequately -- but the kids from homes where non-standard English is used simply aren't taught the standard forms -- largely because the teachers don't know and don't care how to use the language. You know, Susan, even 30 years ago, teachers tended to be drawn from the lower academic half of their class. What's happened today is that they're now drawn from the lower fifth or tenth of the class -- so that their own performance has gone down very sharply.

STAMBERG: And can you imagine that this has some long-run implications?

KLEIN: I certainly do -- because I think what's going to happen is that this will further crystalize the class structure, and that the schools are doing very little to provide upward mobility for students from lower class families. Look. We're in a society in which your adult status depends very heavily on your ability to express yourself. Now, if this ability has to be learned at home, rather than school, your status is going to depend increasingly on who your parents were -- and not on what you could learn for yourself in a school situation. This is what bothers me.

STAMBERG: The opinions and the botheration of David Klein, Professor of Social Sciences at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

BLAIR: Talking to Susan Stamberg, co-host of NPR's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

MERROW: Well, Dr. Al Raby and David Klein say that teachers are unaware of American political realities, and that they're conservative to a fault.

BLAIR: But there are exceptions to every rule.

LOIS WEINER

WEINER: I think the teachers should impart their moral attitudes to students -- because we are in a position of authority, and students know that. So, for instance, I don't allow students to make racial slurs to each other in my room, or to make offensive sexual slurs to each other in my room. I won't go into any examples of what they are, but ...

Although they really don't understand a lot -- most of my reasons for it, I try to explain. They do see that somebody in authority is worried about racial prejudice, and has different values -- and for a lot of the kids, they are values that they're not presented with at home. It's an entirely new thing, for instance, for kids to run into a white person who has some kind of authority and prestige -- who doesn't like the word "nigger" -- or who doesn't like -- a teacher who doesn't like girls to be called "chicks" and "broads" ... and they've never run into it.

I teach in a working-class school district, which means that a lot of times, parents don't have the energy -- although they are concerned about their children's education -- they don't have the energy or the knowledge about how to intervene into the school to change it. Racial tensions are extremely high. I think more than that, though, there is a passivity and an alienation among the teenagers that is very disturbing. On the one hand, they are anti-authority, but on the other hand they are very passive -- and they yield to that authority very easily. And it's not just a return to the old values -- the fifties, or, you know -- rock and roll, or any of that. It's much deeper than that. It's a real demoralization, even about life. The kids really don't have a ... they don't know what their values are, and they don't know -- they don't have any idea of what it's all about ... a lot of them. And I think that's one of the hardest things in education to face.

I want to say one thing about reaching kids. Through the union -- through the Teachers' Union, and also, my student days -- I was very active in the Farm Workers Union -- and I wear a "Farm Workers" button to school quite frequently, and the Chicano kids greet it with a both a respect and a suspicion -- because, incorrectly, they think that the only ... they see everything through racial terms, which is, I think, true of most minority kids. Everything is like they're wearing sunglasses; they put everything in racial terms -- and they cannot believe -- they really cannot believe that there is a white person or an Anglo who would care about them, and who would care about their struggle. And that's why I think it's important for teachers as a group to take positions on things like the farm workers, or like bussing -- because it makes a difference in how the kids view us -- it really does.

BLAIR: Lois Weiner, an English teacher from Hayward, California, talking with NPR reporter David Ensor.

MERROW: And knocking a few holes in the portrait we're painting of American teachers.

BLAIR: According to Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, a lot of the criticism of teachers is unjust.

ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: We tend to throw our teachers into a classroom without any experience, and let them learn for themselves. I think that the way teachers are trained is outrageous -- but I don't think that that is the -- I don't think that's the answer to the question ... in a decline in scores. I think the problem is ... the problem of teacher training has always been similar; I mean, teachers were not better trained ten years ago, or twenty years ago or thirty years ago. If anything, they're better trained today. But if they are not given support; both community and parental -- and if they're not given the time to teach certain subjects, then they're not gonna succeed, and that's precisely what's happening.

BLAIR: Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers. Curriculum in schools may become a matter of compromise. In other words, some parent groups say that schools are too rigid, so schools establish rap sessions, open classrooms and alternative courses like meditation. Other parents say schools don't teach the basics, and so they are sending their children to private schools that stick to the "3 R's". Public school teachers are caught somewhere in the middle.

MERROW: Another problem is one of teacher surplus. There are about twice as many newly trained teachers as there are available teaching jobs each year.

BLAIR: And as any good capitalist will tell you, surplus of labor means low salaries. Arguments about salaries, and a lot of the criticism of public schools have brought teachers together. Two national teacher unions -- the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers -- are fighting to protect the rights of teachers, as well as their salaries.

MERROW: But the fact remains that not all teachers are good -- and the bad teachers are hard to get rid of, as reporter David Ensor discovered when he went out to find out how to fire a lousy teacher. Here's his report.

> MARBURGER: "If you get no satisfaction about the principal going to do something about it, then you have other recourse, and that is, you go to the Board, or you go to the Superintendent of Schools. But don't get put off. Expect something to happen as a result of it. Either that teacher is going to have to get some help, and you can observe some of that help taking place, or some action will be taken by a certain date -- in other words, don't let them stall you, because they will."

ENSOR: Carl Marburger, former New Jersey Commissioner of Education, now a Washington lobbyist for the interests of parents and students. You know, one time or another, a good many parents have to face it: what do you do when your child has a bad teacher? Before the teacher union movement, and a bunch of court decisions, if a principal heard something bad about a teacher -- like she hung out with shady types or his class didn't recite the Lord's Prayer -- he might dismiss them right away. Then came state teacher tenure statues. These vary -- but most say a teacher's entitled to a hearing, during which charges like immorality or incompetence must be proved. Laws about firing teachers have changed over time. In the forties and fifties when McCarthyism raged across the country, school boards forced teachers to sign loyalty oaths, pledge allegiance to the flag and denounce the Communist Party. Teachers turned to the Supreme Court, and the Court decided this practice is unconstitutional.

Then in the sixties, civil rights issues emerged. Could a school board force teachers to list all organizations to which they belonged so it could weed out radicals or integrationists before giving

them tenure? The teachers turned to the courts again, and the courts said "No." Recently, teachers have asserted their right to freedom of speech -- to talk to the press, and to criticize their principal's policies at school board meetings. Here, the court's decision is mixed. Courts say constructive criticism is okay, but insubordination is not -- and the line between them can be very fine.

But now, on top of tenure laws and legal precedence, is an ever-bigger, stronger teacher union movement -- and collective bargaining contracts usually insist on another series of hearings -- evidence and testimony -- before a teacher can be fired. Union lawyers will defend most of their members, and critics say that protecting teachers from unfair bosses is fine -- but the unions are making it too difficult and too expensive to fire any teachers. One who feels this way is Carl Marburger.

CARL MARBURGER

MARBURGER: Most of the cases that were brought before me were what were called "incompetence" -- that the teacher simply could not teach, and the administration was trying to demonstrate that this was a teacher who was damaging children. But usually, there were overtones in all those incompetence cases of some kind of psychotic behavior. Without the psychotic behavior, it probably never would have gotten to me. Psychotic behavior -- throwing things, or not necessarily brutalizing children -- but breaking into tears and running out of rooms -- in a meeting, getting up and doing bizarre things -- almost every case that came before me wasn't a straight "This-is-lousy-teacher-and can't-teach-chil[illegible]en-to-read-and-write-and cipher" -- but -- "This-is-a-lousy-teacher-who-is-demonstrating-these-kind-of-wierd-other-things" ... and on top of that, and obviously, there's a sickness there.

ENSOR: Well, now -- if there wasn't something -- another angle like that -- would the teachers have gone on being, at least in the view of the administrators, incompetent teachers -- and left alone to be incompetent?

MARBURGER: Yeah. That's my judgment -- that if they just simply were incompetent, and couldn't teach children to read, they worked out some other things -- other -- they got some aides in the room, or they transferred that person around often enough so most principals would usually not bring just the pure incompetent teacher before the Board, which simply tells us that it's awful tough to prove incompetence by itself. The other kinds of things usually had to come along with it, and so, when I say that, you know, the teachers' unions and organizations are saying, "Hey! The procedures are there." That may be, but, you know, it just ain't hardly being used!

ENSOR: Former New Jersey Commissioner of Education, Carl Marburger. Teacher union officials disagree with Marburger. They feel the more due process a teacher can get, the better -- and they point out that charging a teacher with incompetence can ruin a career -- and a life. Michael Fay is an official with the United Teachers of Los Angeles. He often sits on teacher dismissal review boards.

MICHAEL FAY

FAY: I can tell you that the easiest and simplest solution to the problem of incompetence is to have a building principal document the basis in fact, and to bring it before a review panel. And I know of no case where a principal is able to document the facts of incompetency where a review panel won't uphold it. Basically, teacher organizations want to guarantee due process, and that is our firmest objective. But we don't defend incompetency.

As you know, our whole judicial system is built on an adversary basis. One goes into court and alleges that such and such is

so -- and that the person who alleges it must prove it -- to the judgment of the court, which stands as neutral. We ask principals to do no more.

ENSOR: Union man, Michael Fay. If the local community doesn't want a convicted felon to teach, no problem. Just present the facts, and you can fire such a teacher. But what about incompetence? Can anybody say exactly what is incompetent teaching? And what may be only mediocre? And how do you prove incompetence? I asked Marburger what yardstick he used in New Jersey.

CARL MARBURGER

MARBURGER: That's tough to respond to -- because I had to use the yardsticks that were provided me by -- in the transcripts -- by the people who testified as to what their perceptions of it was, so I was really the judge in the case. I had to make the determination, based on what was presented to me. That is not responsive to your question, and to be responsive, let me say that we are very incompetent about judging competence, as a profession. We simply don't have competent yardsticks to measure whether someone is doing a good job or not.

ENSOR: Carl Margurger thinks about a quarter -- one in four of our teachers is probably incompetent. Dr. Paul Tractenberg thinks it's even worse -- and getting worse every year. He bases his opinion on a study showing 40% of college freshmen in New Jersey are functionally illiterate. None of them would be good teachers, he says. Yet, many of them will end up pushing chalk in our schools. Tractenberg's a researcher at Rutgers University, and author of Testing The Teacher. He believes we'll find ways to scientifically assess teacher competence.

DR. PAUL TRACTENBERG

TRACTENBERG: One technique that school systems have begun in some instances, by using standardized test results to measure the performance or improvement in performance of students of one teacher against students of other teachers of similar students, similar grade level -- and they form some judgments based on comparing those test results as to how effective a teacher has been.

ENSOR: But do you think that measuring teachers by how well their students do is sort of the wave of the future?

TRACTENBERG: For the first time, we're beginning to see some research findings that suggest that one can measure teacher competence by student performance.

ENSOR: And that you can define what competence is?

TRACTENBERG: Yes -- if there are certain teacher behaviors that seem rather systematically to be linked to better student performance, and that it's not just a random situation where it may vary from year to year, or may vary from mix of personality to mix of personality.

ENSOR: So in other words, they're beginning to decide that teaching's more a science than an art?

TRACTENBERG: Well, at least more in balance. I think the traditional notion that good teaching was unmeasurable and was somehow a function of innate personality characteristics in particular people -- seems to be a view that's not entirely in favor, and not entirely supportable.

ENSOR: Paul Tractenberg, author of Testing the Teacher. But are there really that many incompetent teachers? Union man Michael Fay doesn't think so.

MICHAEL FAY

FAY: Well, you're really talking about the problem of mediocrity in American society. There are a number of teachers who fit that category -- there are a number of administrators -- there are a number of politicians. The question is that our society has accepted mediocrity, and that in and of itself is not a just cause for elimination from employment.

ENSOR: So it seems that neither mediocre nor incompetent teachers lose their jobs very often. Superintendents and principals I spoke to all agree. A smart administrator will do almost anything but fire a teacher. It takes too much time and money -- and it may make relations with other teachers strained. And what if the principal loses his case? Rather than risk that, most principals will relegate a problem teacher to somewhere like the audio-visual department, or convince the teacher to leave on his or her own. Paul Tractenberg says that it is common knowledge that the curriculum development departments within the New York City school system are filled with teachers who couldn't hack it in the classroom. If you're a parent who thinks your child has a bad teacher, Carl Marburger has this parting advice.

CARL MARBURGER

MARBURGER: The easy way out is to get your child transferred to some other teacher ... because that leaves another 25 parents in the same boat.

ENSOR: It must be hundreds that do this every year -- active as parents.

MARBURGER: They do it. And sometimes, there's no option. But I say fight the problem with other parents, and take it to the various principals and other people in the system.

ENSOR: Patience and persistence is your ...

MARBURGER: Patience and persistence and facts. Know what you're doing. Don't just go in on the basis of "My child said that they watched a movie today." But if 12 parents' children said, "We watched a movie 3 days this week, and we watched a movie 3 days last week" -- then you've got some evidence to begin to build, you know, this is a teacher that's goofing off, and not teaching children. So, have facts and persistence, and a lot of energy to do it, too, because it isn't easy. But it's your system. It's parents' system -- and it's their children, and their children only have one crack, and that's this time -- and you can't afford to waste that child's time in that year. And, if indeed, it's a consensus that it isn't just your child that's the problem, and that other children have the same problem -- then, fight it!

ENSOR: I'm David Ensor.

MERROW: We've been pretty critical of teaching so far. But there are many teachers who do their jobs well -- in the face of great odds.

BLAIR: And some odds that aren't so great. Remember the tricks we used to play on teachers?

> STUDENT: "After recess when it's real hot, like in, maybe at the end of school -- and we have these really good drinks of water ... because the water fountains are really cold, and we'd drink the water, fill our mouths up, and then go into the classroom, and hit somebody's cheek, and it would spit at everybody, and it was all ... we used to do that, and then we'd have big spit fights, and then we'd have eraser fights. And then, right when the teacher walked in, we'd run to our seats, you know,

having big eraser marks all over our -- like, blue shirts, you know. 'Who, me? I didn't do anything!' You know, acting innocent!"

STUDENT: "But then we took a spider called Theodore Roosevelt -- you know, it was my black spider ... so I took it, and I put it straight in her face, and I go, 'Here Miss Falzie, meet Theodore Roosevelt!"

STUDENT: "In fourth grade, we had this substitute, Mrs. Ducker, and we wrote on the board all these things about her, and then one time we wrote 'Mrs. Ducker' -- and then we put a word that I'm not gonna say on ... with it ..."

MERROW: "But rhymes with ..."

ALL: "Yes!"

MERROW: "And you guys ... what grade was that? Fourth grade?"

ALL: "Yeah."

MERROW: "Holy Mackerel!"

STUDENT: "Me and a couple of other kids found a can of beer over the other side of a fence. We took this beer over by the jungle gym, and started drinking it. We had to sit in the office for the rest of the week!"

MERROW: "Well, you know, it sounds to me as it you all still play the same old tricks. I mean, we used to play a lot of these tricks about 20-25 years ago. Nothin' new, huh?"

STUDENT: "No. Only a few would be the words, you know?"

MERROW: "But pretty true ... oh yes, right -- that's true. New vocabulary. New vocabulary. Okay ... thanks a lot."

"Welcome back. Your dreams were your ticket out.
Welcome back to that same old place that you laughed about.
Well, the names have all changed since you hung around,
But those dreams have remained, and they've turned around.

Who'd have thought they'd lead you ...
Back there where we need you?
Yeah, we tease him a lot, 'cause we got him on the spot,
Welcome back. Welcome back, welcome back, welcome back.
Welcome back, welcome back ..."

(THEME FROM "WELCOME BACK KOTTER")

MERROW: You know, this is the last in our three-part series about American teachers -- and we asked all of you to write in and tell us about your most memorable teacher.

BLAIR: Some of your letters brought laughter -- some were profoundly disturbing, and we'll read a few of both kinds in a moment.

MERROW: Two weeks ago, we read Charlie McGuire's letter about his favorite teacher. In the meantime, reporter Cathy Lewis talked to that teacher -- Jackson Edwards, who teaches at Harris Hill Elementary School in Clarence, New York.

EDWARDS: If we got off the subject during social studies, then I really don't mind. There's a cemetery over here, and one year we had three funerals. And finally, the fourth one -- we actually talked about a funeral -- even in a cremation, what funerals were about, were they sad? They didn't have to be ... sometimes they were good. It was in this kind of thing, I think, when you treat -- can understand them, be with them, tease them, be their friend, listen to them -- I think this makes the difference.

I always have liked people, so I'm still interested in what they're doing, and where they're going after high school.

LEWIS: Do you remember Charlie McGuire?

EDWARDS: Yeah.

LEWIS: What do you remember about him?

EDWARDS: He had a sister. His sister moved to Cape Cod. They lived on a farm.

LEWIS: What makes you remember him?

EDWARDS: I don't know. I just happen to ... I guess I know his family better than I know Charlie.

LEWIS: Well, OPTIONS IN EDUCATION received a letter from Charlie McGuire about you -- and this was in response to our request for people to write in to us about their most memorable teacher, and that's really why I'm here. So, I'd like to read you that letter and get your reaction to it.

EDWARDS: I can't believe it!

LEWIS: "Dear Sir. You know, it's funny that I would hear your request to write in about my most memorable teacher, because I just saw him last month after the passage of almost 16 years. His name is Mr. Jackson Edwards, and he still teaches in Clarence, New York. He is my sixth grade teacher, and the best one I ever had. The reason I say he is the best is because of how he made me feel -- and his concern for people.

"I was a farmer's son, going to school in town. I never really fit into that sixth grade class. Kids were always making jokes about the manure on my shoes, and I couldn't really fight back. Living on the farm, I had no other kids to interact with, but Mr. Edwards saw the good in everyone, and he had a knack of bringing that talent out in the open for all to see.

"My talent then -- as now -- happens to be singing. I'm a professional folk singer/songwriter. I remember that the first black man I ever saw was doing his student-teaching in Mr. Edwards class that year. I can't recall his name, but he was very articulate, and must have had a difficult time, being the first black teacher in school. I credit Mr. Edwards for taking him into his classroom.

"What Mr. Edwards would do, is once or twice a week, he would gather us around, and this black student-teacher would sing to us. He had a great voice, and our favorite song that he sang was the then-popular hit, 'High Hopes.' We'd sing this song over and over. I discovered that not only did I like to sing, but I was astonished that one man -- even though his color was different -- could hold a whole audience spellbound just singing for them. I felt a kinship with that

black man because he was different, and did not fit in -- just like me -- and yet, he used music to close the gap; to bring us all together. I thank Mr. Edwards for that experience, becuase it changed my life. 'High Hopes' became our theme song that year.

"But the next year, I went to junior high school, and never saw much of Mr. Edwards after that. Then, high school came, and college, then my family moved away. But the years that passed since my sixth grade experience in 1960 did not dim my admiration for Mr. Edwards and his kindness.

"So this Fall, I was on tour, and I was performing at the University of Buffalo. I was mailing a letter from the post office in Clarence, where I used to live -- and I looked up, and who did I see but Mr. Edwards coming through the door. I couldn't say anything to him, but he looked at me for a moment, as if he knew who I was, then stepped past me to buy some stamps. I waited until he left, and looked out of the post office window to watch him get into his car and drive away.

"But he didn't drive away, because he saw in his rear view mirror what I saw. A woman had just pulled into the parking lot, and her number plate on her front bumper was almost off. I knew what Mr. Edwards would do, even before he did it. He got out of the car again, and walked over to the lady, and told her about the number plate. Then he got tools from his car, and fixed the plate so that it was firmly bound to the bumper again.

"There I was, watching Mr. Edwards practice what he always taught us in school -- that kindness is something you do every day. Just by that little example, I knew that Mr. Edwards was the same good man I remembered him to be. The next time I'm on tour in New York, I'm going to tell Mr. Edwards what I've told you -- that he was my most memorable teacher."

EDWARDS: Well, I'll be darned. I wish I had known ... I can remember names ... I usually remember faces, but ... I'm sorry I didn't say hello to him. I'll be jiggered! Well, you never know what a smile or a "hello" will do. I can't believe it. I'd like to see him again, too.

LEWIS: Did you recognize him that day at the post office?

EDWARDS: I guess not. I would have said hello to him. That bothers me now, that I didn't recognize him. I'm sorry he didn't say hello. If you like people -- and you never know what impression you've made ... I try to make our class a friendly place, and I guess this kind of makes it worthwhile. I certainly remember singing that year. In fact, I wish elementary teachers were required to play the piano -- we'd sing every day. In fact, we sang "High Hopes" at graduation ... really, there were tears in the audience that night. It was a real fine night."

BLAIR: Harris Hill Elementary School teacher, Jackson Edwards, talking with Kathy Lewis of Station WBFO in Buffalo, New York.

"Next time you fall with your chin on the ground,
There's a lot to be learned ...
So look around!"

("HIGH HOPES")

MERROW: That student -- and teacher -- remember something they had in common; love of music.

BLAIR: An awful lot of you wrote in about your teachers, and of course, we couldn't get all the students and teachers together -- but we thought

you might like to hear some of the letters we got from teacher's pets and teacher's pests all over the country.

MERROW: And here we go!

BLAIR: Christine Howard in Colorado Springs writes:

"Miss McGlynn taught us as though each moment was a chore, only to be borne for the monetary gain. She tolerated her students and preferred them if they kept well down to the grindstone and never bothered her --whether or not there was any acquisition of learning, knowledge, or even skill. The only thing I can say for her is that we learned in spite of her -- and I imagine, in part, to spite her."

MERROW: I had a couple of teachers like that, Wendy. I just as soon not remember them!

BLAIR: I did, too ... yes. Now, I have another one here.

MERROW: Okay ... go ahead.

BLAIR: Melba Wallach writes from San Diego, California:

"Not only did I learn, but I had great esteem for my teacher. She also believed in socializing. On several occasions, she invited me and Adele Pierce -- her 2 best students -- to come to her home. I remember eating cream cheese and jelly on crackers for the very first time, and having cocoa with it. My family had a very modest income, and didn't indulge in cream cheese."

MERROW: That's called individualized attention -- individualized instruction. Here's another memory -- from John Gwaltney, who is an Associate Professor now at Syracuse. He's talking about Miss Althea Nichols in Montclair, New Jersey. He says:

"I am immeasurably indebted to that segacious lady, because she gave my mind running room in realms which are still as fresh and exhilarating as they were the very first day she talked and read of them. The scope of my indebtedness to her is past reckoning. She showed me how to saw a reasonably straight line. She showed me the shape of everything from Kodiak bears to the Continent of Africa. She introduced me to Burl Ives, Felix Weingardner, Derek Oldham and Margaret Meade. She showed me the feel of everything from ducklings to rose quartz. Her reading table was "Open Sesame" to Arabian Nights, and olden days of every conceivable kind. In those days, I rarely journeyed physically beyond the confines of Essex, my natal New Jersey county, but my mind ranged freely from Andora to Zambawonga. My curiosity, and Miss Nichols' encyclopedic knowledge and monumental patience brought those bright regions to my fingertips. In brief, Miss Nichols was a rare teacher."

MERROW: That letter is perhaps even more meaningful when you realize that Mr. Gwaltney is blind, and has been blind since birth.

BLAIR: Now here's one from Shirley Rickets in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Shirley writes:

"I had many teachers who were bitter old maids. One named Miss Toomey, our hygene teacher ... oh, she was a beaut! Tight lipped, hair worn in a bun, black dress, white collars and cuffs -- she didn't like the kids, especially girls who were more attractive. When I wore lipstick, she'd say, 'Well, here comes Miss Christmas tree, all lighted up!'

"So, after all the hassle with teachers such as Miss Haffner,

Home Economics, who told us to cook spaghetti for twenty minutes, and I said, 'No one cooks spaghetti for twenty minutes, unless you want mush!' -- I quit school at the end of the tenth grade. I never really learned a damn thing I could ever use in real life!"

MERROW: I have another that fits into that category, Wendy. This is from Steve Leewald in Clearwater, Florida:

"As is the case of most young children, I was a little apprehensive about going to school at all. Kindergarten went off all right, as I was the biggest one in class -- and as such, enjoyed being in the position of being a bully to the rest of my classmates.

"When first grade rolled around, and I tried the same stunts, I was rudely awakened to the fact that I could not do as I pleased. The teacher had a rather unique way of punishing. She took a yardstick, and normally, we would be hit with this thing on the inside of the forearm, and on the palm of the hand. Needless to say, after my first and second brush with old what's-her-name, I decided that this was <u>not</u> the place for me.

"I'd leave home early in the morning, and just never get to school. The truant officer would them come looking for me. In one instance, when me and Tony skipped together, Mom was not at home, and she came right on in our house, looking for us. We hid the best we could, but slowly and relentlessly, she came stalking us. It was like being in a horror movie! Closer and closer she came -- my blood raced through my body, and my heart pounded like a jackhammer. I just knew it would give me away.

"It did. She took us back to school, and there, the other old what's-her-name was waiting for us. After a while, my hands developed callouses, and I could stand there defiantly, and look her square in the face. Once there were no longer any places to hide, I stopped skipping school. She made me the 'chalk board cleaner', and that was quite an honor in itself.

"I look back on this with humor, and laugh that 'those were the good old days.' I haven't told my daughter about this, because I don't want her to expect it to happen to her one day. She's five years old. Maybe next year!"

BLAIR: Here's a letter in verse from Lea Adams, who lives in Washington D.C.:

"Mr. Phillips, at Gordon Junior High, looked like
a penguin -- oh me oh my -- and held math bees,
Addition and substraction, throwing candy to the
pupil with the fastest reaction.
Mrs. Mayo Wells taught poetry and prose, and
if she caught you with gum, she stuck it to your nose!
Which was also used to push peanuts cross the floor,
If the class was seated when you came through the door.
As for dear Gordon, enough has been said --
To fill the bottom of this page, for OFS IN ED!"

MERROW: And that's all about teachers for now. Thanks for the memories!

BLAIR: Reports for this program came from Lloyd Gite, Station KERA, Dallas, Texas; Jennifer Alt, KUKE-KUNI, Cedar Falls, Iowa; Cathy Lewis, WBFO, Buffalo, New York; Scott Simon, WBEZ, Chicago, Illinois; Jay Baltazore in San Francisco, and David Ensor in Washington.

MERROW: If you'd like transcripts of this three-part series on

American teachers, send 75¢ to National Public Radio -- Education, Washington, D.C. 20036. Please ask for programs number 62, 63 and 64. Cassettes cost $10.00. The three transcripts are 75¢. The address again. National Public Radio -- Education, Washington, D.C. 20036.

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BLAIR: This program is produced by Jo Ellyn Rackleff. Associate Producer, David Selvin; Executive Producer, John Merrow. Technical assistance by Jim Anderson and Jeff Geller. I'm Wendy Blair.

MERROW: This is NPR - National Public Radio.